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# ‘They Just Let Go’

James Purdy’s ‘Desiring Machines’  
and the Dramatic Sense of His Fiction

by Dr Richard Canning

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# HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



a novel  
**JAMES  
PURDY**

*author of* IN A SHALLOW GRAVE



Aisle 3

# ‘They just let go’:

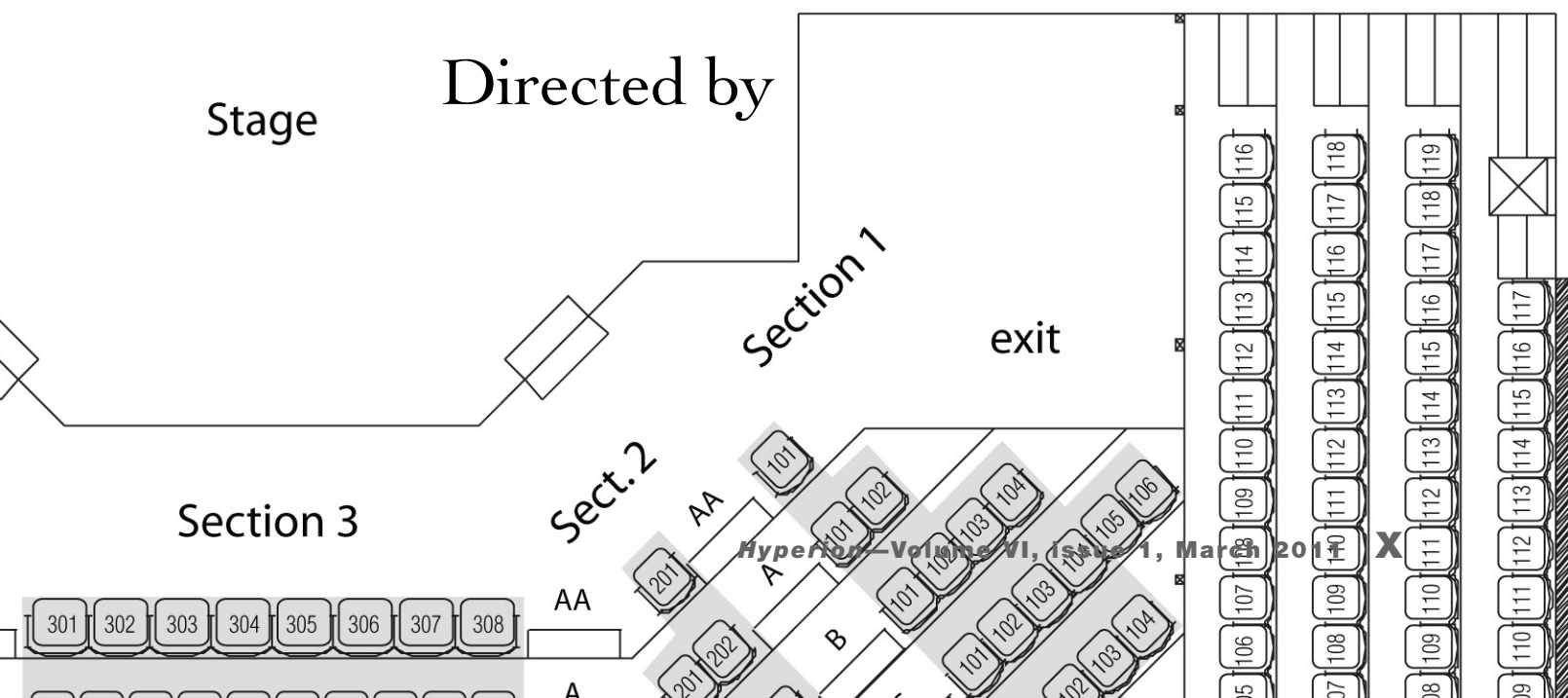
James Purdy’s

‘Desiring Machines’

and the Dramatic Sense of his Fiction

Written by Dr Richard Canning

Aisle 1



**T**. S. Eliot wrote in 1937 of Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* that it had 'a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy.'<sup>1</sup> I shall not be outlining the many plausible connections to be made between Barnes's idiosyncratic work of high modernism and Purdy's prose or dramatic writings though such a study would surely prove fruitful. Barnes and Purdy belong, for one, to that small minority of twentieth-century authors to have, in a sense, refused to adopt a specialism; that is, they both wrote, published, and saw staged works of poetry, prose, and theatre. Purdy began his writing career as a dramatist, as John Uecker has pointed out in his introduction to Purdy's *Selected Plays*, and much that is dramatic in his fiction is indebted to these origins.<sup>2</sup>

Several critics have drawn comparisons between Purdy's *oeuvre* and the priorities and instincts of authors of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, perhaps encouraged by Purdy's own citation of the genre—and various well-known examples of it—as amongst the literature he revered and learnt from. In a 1997 interview, Purdy poured perhaps predictable scorn on the inability of literary critics to 'approach my books,' as well as more generally on the literary *Zeitgeist*, characteristically using the opportunity to define his writing against that which prevails in our culture.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically addressing both fiction and the stage, Purdy described contemporary writing as 'all subject; no content': 'They're all just: "This is the way it is." The characters aren't real.' His distinction—between two apparently analogous terms, 'subject' and 'content,' betrays the ways in which Purdy insisted on the formal strategies of transformation, by which the ephemerality of present-day concerns and characterizations (which lack 'real' substance) might become, in literary terms, resonant, symbolic, or even mythical (and thus laden with enduring 'content'). Purdy's terminology is far from exact, characteristically, and in following it thus far, I am aware that I risk being accused of Purdyesque imprecision. However, earlier in the same interview Purdy had offered a certain amplification of the subject/content distinction. According to this logic, the 'subject' matter in a Rembrandt painting has been identified by—and celebrated for—surface considerations, such as the accurate detailing of (now) historical costume. Its 'content,' contrastingly, amounts to Purdy to something innately spiritual (and implicitly pan-historical): the matter of the human 'soul.' Moreover, he implicitly and imaginatively compared himself to the painter, who was 'scolded . . . for doing studies of blacks and old women':



Those things he painted of Negroes are the most wonderful things I've ever seen. He really got their souls. But they wanted him to paint people in lovely costumes with beautiful ruffs—like 'The Nightwatch.' I thought: 'That's the problem today; you're supposed to please people.'<sup>4</sup>

Purdy later described himself having a 'relationship' with Jacobean tragedy, claiming to read works by Thomas Middleton and John Webster and others 'all the time.'<sup>5</sup> Of his own books, *Narrow Rooms* (1978) he specifically described as 'Jacobean,' going on to mention its closeness to Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, a 'brilliant' play. Of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Purdy praised its language, saying of the Jacobeans: 'they just let go.'<sup>6</sup> Of course, any attempt to link Jacobean literature with any painterly world view, including that of Rembrandt, active some decades later and in a quite different cultural milieu, must be a strain. There is no easy way of eliding the artistic processes of an oil painter with those of the wordsmith. What Purdy is celebrating, I take it, in the integrity of a Rembrandt canvas, with what critics understand as its coherence of visual symbolism, approximated, nevertheless—to Purdy at least—to the rhetorical fluency of playwrights such as Middleton and Webster. In unleashing a set of recurrent motifs, imagery and symbols, these playwrights did indeed—notwithstanding the method beneath their linguistic inventiveness—appear to 'just let go.' John Uecker comparably recalled Purdy's love of the Elizabethan dramatist Christopher Marlowe's 'hypnotic structures ... where the play rests on a singular driving force throughout.'<sup>7</sup>

It may seem paradoxical, then, that some critics, such as Tony Tanner, have focused upon the awkwardness with which Purdy's characters express themselves—'not letting go' would be a better summation of their invariably flawed self-expression, however vital the urge. Indeed, though Tanner did not make the connection, I would argue that there is, in Purdy's most brutal narratives, a correlation between inarticulateness and an urge to violence perhaps previously only so forcefully evident in a story I often think of in relation to Purdy, Melville's *Billy Budd*—itself a work of innate dramatic potency, as Benjamin Britten perceived.

However, Purdy was arguing for the expressiveness and attention to design of playwright or author, not the character, of course. Driving the latter's actions is, fundamentally, a series of states of desire, a collective 'desiringness,' if you like, which can be seen as another of Purdy's strong links to the Renaissance dramatic world. Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot*, provides helpful commentary here; accounting for the extraordinary power of Balzac as a storyteller, Brooks coined the phrase 'desiring machines' to describe

his protagonists, who motor plots that veer between drama and melodrama, that seduce each other, and the reader, with storytelling guile.<sup>8</sup> It is all too evident from Brooks's focus on works of narrative prose that there is nothing essentially dramatic about such dedication. This is precisely why I have found the term 'desiring machines' so useful, however, in considering Purdy's prose in the context of dramatic method. When Amos Ratcliffe and Daniel Haws come together in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967), for instance, Purdy expressly figures their love as born of something other than their conscious selves: 'Awake, he [Daniel] not only never made a single pass at Amos Ratcliffe, but seemed to keep a gulf between them all the time.'<sup>9</sup> Daniel approaches Amos sexually only by way of his inveterate sleepwalking, a state in which he is 'as different from the daytime Daniel Haws as a dream is from everyday reality.'<sup>10</sup> In a 1993 interview with Christopher Lane, Purdy helpfully and simply glossed the attraction Daniel felt for Amos as stemming from 'what the Greeks call Eros, which you couldn't do anything about; if you resisted, you would be destroyed in Greek mythology.'<sup>11</sup>

Later in that novel, Daniel finds himself drawn to Captain Stadger, executor of baleful physical punishment, in a comparably fatalistic way—rather as Billy Budd accepts the wrongheaded steering of the Court Martial by Captain Vere in Melville's tale, which will lead to his execution. Haws's embrace of Stadger's vicious assault on him, moreover, has clear echoes of Edward II's end, murdered with a red hot spit thrust into his anus, as first detailed in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577/87). Although Christopher Marlowe in his play *Edward II* has his protagonist killed by nothing more shocking than a table, the story of the monarch's dispatch has wide enough currency to invite comparison to Haws's unconditional desire for the 'hideous pain' Stadger will inflict upon him in the novel's last pages:

“

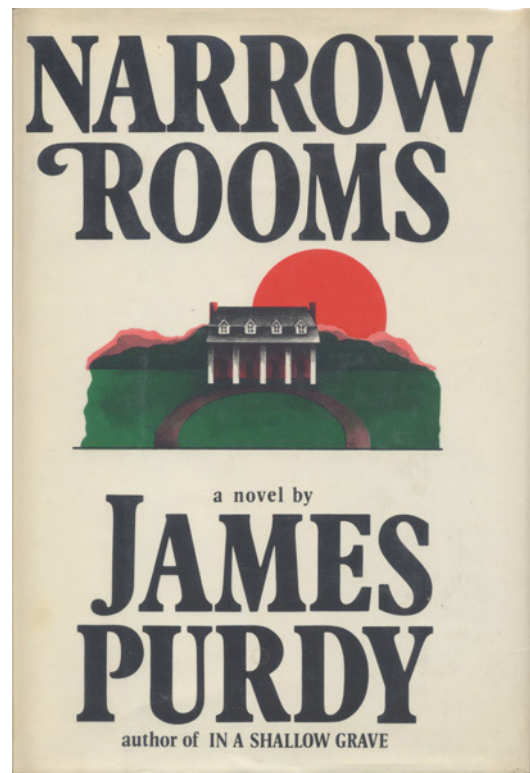
At first Daniel thought he was being attacked with the billy club which in the captain's powerful hands was being used for this new excruciating torment, but looking back against his orders, before he felt the correcting pistol whip his face, he saw an iron instrument of unbelievable medieval shape and monstrous design, held in the captain's other hand and thrusting itself now in Daniel's body, the first of the "real" instruments, he supposed, to be used in breaking him down to "submission."<sup>12</sup>

Certainly Daniel's "desiring" of this brutal attack shocks; it is a shock, however, replicated in other Purdy novels, such as *Narrow Rooms* (1978), in which ex-convict Sidney anticipates fatalistically his appointment with Destiny in the form of "the Renderer."

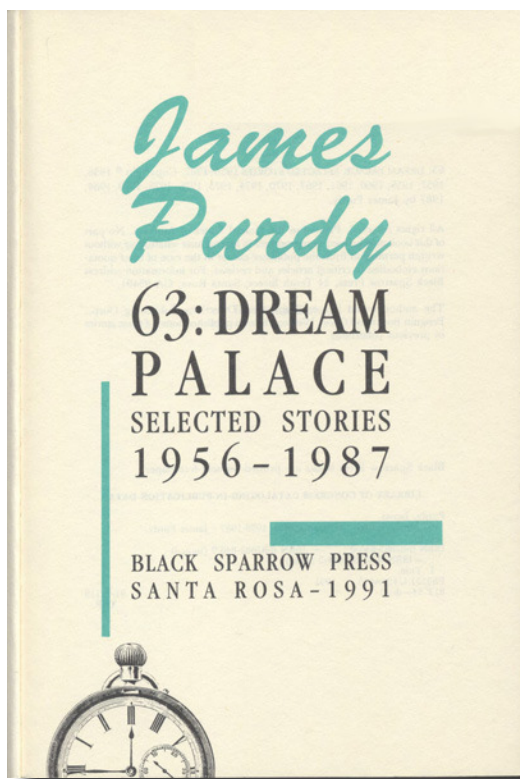


As a summary of human motives—or rather, those pronounced and defined in certain works of literature—Brooks’s notion of ‘desiring machines’ stretches, I believe, to absorb readily at least one other genre and one distinct writer, both of which have inspired Purdy in his writings. First is the picaresque, a genre whose literary method invariably deploys desire, or desiringness, as a means—sometimes subtle, sometimes brutal—of moving along the picaresque hero. In the 1997 interview, Purdy admitted to a reverence for what he called Cervantes’s ‘stories about young boys,’ as well as for the anonymously authored staple *Lazarillo de Tormes* and the Spanish picaresque novel in general.<sup>13</sup> Desire, in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, might be sated on occasion. But in the tragic-comic fictional world of the picaresque, so often reminiscent of Purdy’s own, it is more likely to be thwarted, ridiculed, countered, refused, or transformed. The picaresque equally and naturally renders with unequalled clarity the dependency of literary works not only upon language but the physical act of oration. As anyone who witnessed Madrid’s staged readings of the entirety of Cervantes’s novel to commemorate the book’s anniversary in 2005 can testify, such dependency likewise solicits a state of pronounced, voluble ‘desiringness’ in a reader. The result is a narrative compact or mutual dependency or contingency we feel routinely in Purdy too, the best analogy for which seems to me to be an equable, even absurd suspension of disbelief entered into by the theatergoer, and the equally requisite affectiveness of the stagebound actor-as-character.

The author I want to mention is eighteenth-century French playwright Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de Marivaux. Purdy has never, to my knowledge, expressed an admiration for Marivaux, but the analogies are impossible to ignore. No dramatist in history can so precisely be accounted for by Brooks’s notion of characters as ‘desiring machines,’ and the extreme ruthlessness and textual economy with which Marivaux cuts his figures free from anything other than the primacy of their desires urges the comparison further. Equally suggestive is the fluency with which Marivaux transgressed the boundary between conventional dramatic idioms of tragedy and comedy in plays such as *The Double Inconstancy*, *The False Servant*, and *The Game of Love and Chance*. Billed as comedies, these are works which invariably make us tense, confused, wretched, and perhaps sickly as fast as they could make us laugh. In his time, Marivaux was mocked for the perceived smallness of his interests and literary ambition, as well as suspected for the ease with which







he routinely inverted normative assumptions regarding both sexual desire and gendered performance and self-presentation, further analogies to the “shock value” of Purdy’s stories about explicitly homosexual characters, from *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* on. Marivaux’s heroes are commonly seen on the brink of, or in the moment of acting on, inappropriate and culturally unintelligible erotic urges; naturally, this being comedy, all finally proves well. By stepping out of what is socially and culturally respectable, they wittily and confoundingly end up reinforcing the very values they threaten to contradict. Still, as with Shakespeare’s “problem plays,” there is a tragic element to, and an individual dramatic pathos in, Marivaux’s protagonist’s drivenness, their ‘desiringness.’

A plausible, if indirect act of literary linkage might posit Jean Genet as the link between Marivaux and Purdy. Purdy’s writing has been compared to many examples of existential literature, as well as to writers associated with the school of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’—Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Edward Albee.

The match may be less appropriate than may first appear; when Albee himself was encouraged by this assumed commonality to turn Purdy’s first novel *Malcolm* into a play, the result was what Purdy called ‘terrible. Awful.’<sup>14</sup> With typical perversity he then conceded: ‘I’m glad he did it. It had moments, but I don’t know that anyone could put *Malcolm* on the stage.’<sup>15</sup>

Purdy’s oft-stated enthusiasm for Jean Genet certainly does make sense, if we consider that author’s masterpiece of dramatic condensation, *The Balcony* (*Le Balcon*), a study in the bleak prescription and fatalism of the basically natural human state of ‘desiringness.’<sup>16</sup> Looking backwards, *The Balcony* resembles a Marivaux comedy for a modern age of cynical, Godless despair; looking forwards, it foreshadows, loosely, the brutal awareness of a shared sense of imposition and abandonment with which Purdy’s characters in fiction and on stage conduct themselves.

It was not on stage, however, but in the film *Un Chant d’Amour* and in fictions such as *Our Lady of the Flowers* and *Querelle of Brest* that Genet himself brought together a broadly existentialist world-view with a grimly fatalistic view of the “acting out” of sexual desires between men. Purdy has always vociferously argued against both the Balkanisation of literary analysis—against, explicitly, the very idea of a gay fictional tradition—and indeed of sexual archetypes themselves. In the 1997 interview, he quoted the Roman comic dramatist Terence: “Homo sum”—“I am a human being; I count nothing

human foreign to me.”<sup>17</sup> Still, the relationship between the tragic selfhood of many of his characters and their sexual desires is, of course, specific to every case. It may be stretching the point, but, like Barnes’s *Nightwood*, Purdy’s novelistic containment of the inalienably tragic status of the figure of the homosexual coincides with a personal incomprehension at the very idea of identity formations, identity politics or ‘liberation.’ Late in life, Barnes would tell enquirers sharply: ‘I never was a lesbian. I just loved Thelma.’<sup>18</sup> Purdy commented to me that ‘for most of us, being gay was a very heavy burden. I think it still is . . . It’s still very tragic to be gay.’<sup>19</sup> Defaulting, as it were, on the need to reflect the tragic status of the sexual minority amounts for Purdy to committing the greatest sin a writer can commit—dishonesty:



There’s this book . . . where the son found out his father was gay. They just had this lark together. That’s fantasy! When you think of the suffering most gays have suffered through the centuries: they’ve been burned at the stake; mistreated by the literary establishment.<sup>20</sup>

The sense of personal injury—if not of being ‘burned at the stake’—was reiterated in a reference to his ‘mistreatment’ by *The New York Times*: ‘When you’re hit with a brick, your body knows it. You can forget it, but you’re going to have a wound there.’<sup>21</sup>

Not only there. Purdy announced in the interview a sort of mutual empathy between himself as author and his readers. Critics had condemned the brutality of some of his novels’ endings, such as *Eustace Chisholm* and *Narrow Rooms*. But, Purdy argued, did these people think he as author had been any less disturbed by what he had written?: ‘Well, I had to go to hospital. Those endings made me sick.’<sup>22</sup> Wounded or not, Purdy was not cowed. His sense was of subjects and stories finding him—or rather, lodging themselves into his consciousness and refusing to leave: The drama of inspiration and composition is one which this author at any rate has always talked up; just as boxing prints adorned the walls of his apartment, he considers the profession of writing to be akin to the sport. One tactical aspect which Purdy also glossed relates to the reading public’s assumption—to Purdy, misunderstanding—concerning literary genre and classification. Just as his own ‘desire’ for stories precludes consideration of sexual type, class, race—according to his own estimate—the form in which he will write them up likewise remained beyond his control, or accessed at the level of the unconscious. In 1993, Purdy embraced this Romantic, vatic concept of inspiration outright:

“

I don't really think my work is fantasy so much as it's unconscious; everyone has an unconscious, even the politically correct. The politically correct must be very upset by their own dreams because they don't believe in the unconscious; they think everything is conscious.<sup>23</sup>

Of his plays, Purdy commented:

“

They won't do them here. They say Midwestern speech isn't suitable for Broadway. Then again, the plays aren't gay. That puzzles my gay friends. But I know these stories from my great-grandmother. I like them. I'm queer for stories! It doesn't matter to me what kind of people are in them. If I like their story, I'm going to write it.<sup>24</sup>

Once the genre is determined, Purdy proceeds; the way he described doing so sounding, like so much of his writing, at first self-evident or obvious:

“

I start writing something and think: "This is a play." They're very different, because all the work has to be done by an actor. A big load's taken off your chest in a way, because in a novel you're talking to someone. You're telling them: "This is the way it happened."<sup>25</sup>

This comment is in fact highly revealing, however, since it directly compares the contingent dynamic of the actor-audience relationship to that of the fiction writer-reader one. The performance, or 'work' involved in novel writing, to Purdy, involved something just as intimate, immediate, direct, and dependent upon a mutual desiringness—a mutual wish for the tale to be offered up and received—and a mutual awareness of the partial, particular use of language to effect this. Purdy may feel that the specific elements of the stories dictated their substance—the burden of the tragic, or the capacity for levity—but, like Marivaux, he retains the right to cross-pollinate. He is proud of deploying humour, for example, where it might be deemed unfit. Of Malcolm's circumstances, Purdy said:



They [the critics] don't see why it's funny, because it's so terrible. Well, it's both. We often laugh at tragic things. It's a form of hysteria.<sup>26</sup>

In a comic yet absurd opinionated moment, Purdy reacted to the complimentary approaches of one revered playwright after a performance of one of Purdy's own plays by turning some self-evidently positive comments into something he felt obliged to reject:



Tennessee Williams came to all my off-Broadway plays and said: "You're a playwright." I said: "Excuse me—do you mean that I'm not a novelist?" He said: "I think you're more of a playwright." I don't believe that.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, Williams had mined his own shorter fiction extensively, reworking it methodically into theatre—some works becoming more dramatic than others. The close relationship between Williams' prose writing and his renowned stage pieces, however, stands in contrast to the distinctness of Purdy's novels and his plays; this might also help us to understand his need to reject Williams's apparent compliment.

If confluence between works of drama and fiction—themes, forms, aims—is something Purdy has long eschewed, it is worth considering his early writing, and the novella 63: *Dream Palace* and novel *Malcolm* in particular in light of this. It has been noted that one aspect of Purdy's characters' struggle toward expression is their tendency to be frustrated authors. *Cabot Wright Begins* (1964) concerns not one but several struggles toward the writing of a rapist's life story. Central is the Carrie/Bernie relationship, predicated on Carrie's belief that Bernie has 'a great book inside of him.'<sup>28</sup> Like Bernie, Eustace Chisholm will have his literary aspirations thwarted; his 'failed attempt to combine marriage with the calling of narrative poet' absurdly being reflected in his inability to afford proper paper on which to write his epic poem about America.<sup>29</sup>

Notably absent, however, from the series of aspirational authors in Purdy's novels is any dramatist; indeed the world of the theatre is one which passes out of Purdy's fictional horizons after these early works. It may be that he had successfully "bifurcated" his creativity, given that his second novel, *The Nephew* (1961) has an extremely cinematic non-theatrical *mise en scène*, compared to its predecessor. This evidently coincided with some success on Purdy's part in writing drama; he would have been working on *The Nephew*

at the same time as the plays 'Children is All' and 'Cracks.'<sup>30</sup> In the perhaps over-literal sense of finding the world of the theatre a useful canvas within his novels, Purdy presents us with little at all beyond this point—though, I maintain that in consequence the fictions retain their theatricality.

Still, funerals, dance-rooms, occasional musical concerts and even Ku Klux Klan marches more commonly allow for the presence of ritual, self-staging, and performative self-invention and reinvention in novels such as *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, *In a Shallow Grave*, and *Narrow Rooms*. The sense is that, as Purdy established himself as a writer of the first rank, the performance of his narration—or his implied author's narration—is less marked by echoes or nods toward actual theatrical performance in the tales themselves. I will return to 63: *Dream Palace* and *Malcolm* in a moment, but want to mention in passing one possible exception to this claim.

The figure of Dr. Ulric in *Narrow Rooms* begs for comparison with Djuna Barnes's almost all-orating surrogate narrator and cabaret performer manqué, Dr. Matthew O'Connor. Barnes allows for most of the body of *Nightwood* to be orated by this figure, who turns out to be complicit as well as suspect in terms of the book's accounts of sexual deviance. Purdy gives his doctor much less dramatic space, but in the following paragraph, the similarity to the solipsistic, story bound O'Connor is uncanny:

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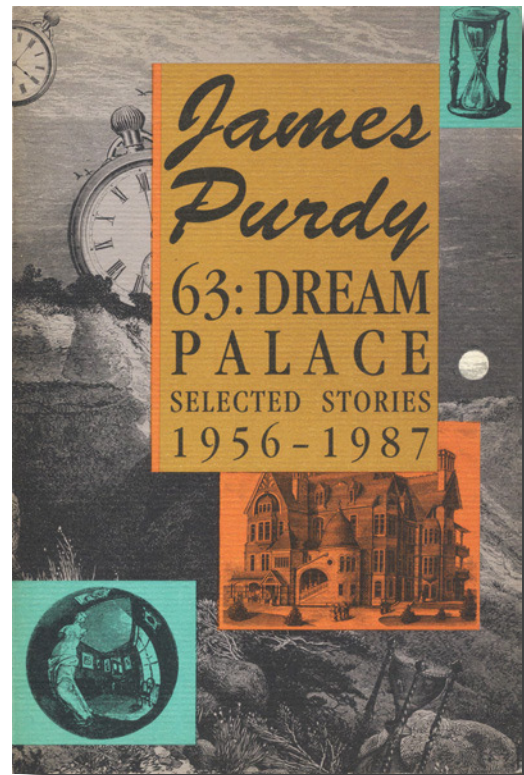
Dr. Ulric's one pleasure in life outside of his dark imported cigarettes was, once he got started, talking—talking not so much to you as around you, it didn't matter who the patient was when he got started. He had been known also to talk to his cat, and these lengthy speeches usually touched on medicine, and came helped by his having read most of the 5,000 books in his library which spilled all over his fifteen-room pillared house.<sup>31</sup>

As in *Nightwood*, Purdy plays this scene for comedy, though we are expressly told that those who encountered Ulric tended to think of him wearing that other dramatic mask: 'he was almost never seen to smile. His face was ... disappointed in aspect.'<sup>32</sup> (One thinks here too of *Malcolm*: 'There is a great deal to tell, *always*, Malcolm.' Kermit spoke somewhat gravely now.)<sup>33</sup> Ulric, another of Purdy's feted talkers, is unlikely to be as unlucky as those others in the novel condemned, by their inability to articulate in part, to act, since their actions are brutal and self-defeating by turns. Still, in the theatrical environment of the consultation room, Ulric derives 'pleasure' from his own logorrhea as surely as Beckett's Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot* (1953), or his mouth in *Not I* (1972).



The theatricality of conversation in Purdy can have other absurd effects. Tony Tanner has stressed Purdy's characters' common inflexibility or ignorance in respect of those hearing them in the fictions. 63: *Dream Palace* (1956) contains the chief—sole?—example of Purdy literally placing one of his logorrheic protagonists on the stage. If the performance itself is announced—a 'tent production of *Othello* ... to take place that night near Sixty-third Street' — and, as Bruno Korsawski alleges, in talking it up to the hapless Fenton, widely anticipated, Purdy nonetheless insists upon the accidental nature of Fenton's own brush with the theatre.<sup>34</sup> The friendship with Bruno is as performative and opportunistic as that between Shakespeare's tragic hero and Iago, the villain. Iago, it is implied in the play, longs for Othello's 'company and protection'; Bruno 'welcome[s]' the very same in respect of Fenton. It goes without saying that Purdy gives no quarter to notions of historical difference or incongruity between the two pairs of characters.

Given Purdy's tendency to offer up culture—of whatever quality—for the American masses to devour, distort, and destroy (as in *Cabot Wright Begins*), it is unsurprising that Bruno, in talking of Hayden Banks, the actor playing Othello, reflects the values of celebrity and personality which have replaced a purer cultural engagement. Hayden Banks—aptly named—may or may not be 'one of the greatest living actors.' In any case, Bruno proceeds to explain just how such formulations have come to eclipse more rounded and nuanced critical judgments; his is an economics of desire, grounded not on a particular response to a specific achievement, but to market-driven understandings of who is now fashionable:<sup>35</sup>



“

“You are probably seeing him just before he is to gain his international reputation. London is already asking for him. Few actors can touch him. He is playing, of course, Othello himself. The costumes are by a friend of mine, and I will introduce you to a good many of the cast, if you like.”

“I don't know if I want that,” Fenton said.

“You *will* go with me to the performance,” the young man said.

Fenton did not say anything. He had to go somewhere, of course, there could be no doubt about that.<sup>36</sup>

It transpires that Bruno's interest in the theatre coincides suspiciously with a desire to avoid bumping into a Mexican man, unaccountably following him (this, then, the real drama of the episode). He also wants to point out his own closeness to the production. When they take their seats, therefore, he tells Fenton: "“You see what influence can do for you.” Bruno pointed. “The best seats: compliments of Hayden Banks.””<sup>37</sup>

Bruno fears Fenton's lack of interest—'maybe you don't like Shakespeare'—but is coerced by circumstance to act upon the opportunity of seeing the play, if for perverse reasons.<sup>38</sup> On reaching the site, the pair find that, instead of any reference to the author, there are 'banners reading HAYDEN BANKS THE GENIUS OF THE SPOKEN WORD IN OTHELLO.' The 'rather old looking young man dressed . . . like a devil you might expect to see in an old Valentine' will, worryingly, be playing Iago.<sup>39</sup>

Fenton's anticipations concerning the play further reflect the distorting power exerted by contemporary values upon literary works; at the same time, he witnesses not the manic enthusiasm talked up by Bruno, but the presumably more probable phenomenon of general torpor:

“

Fenton remembered vaguely of having read *The Merchant of Venice* and he had heard from someplace that *Othello* had to do with a black man who tortured a white woman to death. He felt a vague curiosity to see Hayden Banks, however. There was nobody around the huge empty tent tonight, and the whole scene reminded him of the conclusion of a county fair which he had seen in West Virginia.<sup>40</sup>

The omen is not good. Naturally Purdy has positioned Fenton so as to allow for the maximum comic potential in his behavior, and, mischievously, then, the biggest incursion of the comic into the tragedy of the Moor:

“

Whether it was the nearness of the actors or the oppressive heat of the tent or the general unintelligibility of both what the actors said and what they did, Fenton became sleepy, and he could not control a weakness he had for breaking wind, which considerably upset Bruno, although nobody else in the small audience seemed to hear...

When Hayden Banks made his appearance, there was a tremendous ovation from the first few rows of the tent, and



for a while Fenton watched this tall bony man beat his chest with complete lack of restraint and such uncalled-for fury that Fenton was amazed at such enormous energy. He could think of nothing in his own life that would have allowed him to pace, strut and howl like this. He supposed it belonged to an entirely different world where such things were perhaps done. The more, however, the great Moor shouted and complained about his wife's whoring, the more sleepy Fenton became. It was, however, something of a surprise to hear him fret so much about a whore and have so many rich-looking people nodding and approving of the whole improbable situation . . .<sup>41</sup>

Our sympathies here are nicely complex. The play is both 'unintelligible,' either as written or delivered, and evidently 'improbable,' a charge to which *Othello* has indeed long been held especially vulnerable (in part because of the plot device of the dropped handkerchief). Fenton gets tired at all the language—as Purdy's Malcolm similarly comments, 'Conversation makes me quite sleepy.'<sup>42</sup> Doubtless he behaves discourteously in breaking wind, but no more so, arguably, than the performers who are hamming up the play relentlessly—especially Banks, in pursuit of his reputation as 'GENIUS OF THE SPOKEN WORD.' He offends only the manipulative Bruno.

Again, there is an analogous moment in *Malcolm*; after one argument, we hear: 'What a ridiculous play of pretended emotion,' Kermit cried, addressing his wife.<sup>43</sup> "Real" argument here has come to seem as fallacious as gimcrack theatre. As deserved as Fenton's interventions in 63: *Dream Palace* may be, however, they stem from his own incapacity to appreciate the piece in any respect. Notwithstanding his concern at its improbable element, he engages with the drama only when it reaches its violent, 'rather frighteningly good' zenith:

“

Hayden Banks seemed to murder the woman named Desdemona (Aurelia Wilcox in real life) with such satisfaction and enjoyment that he felt it stood with some of the better murder shows he had seen at the ALL NIGHT THEATER. He applauded quite loudly and Bruno, smiling, finally held his hand and said, "Don't overdo it."<sup>44</sup>

Fittingly then—notwithstanding the histrionics on stage—Fenton is berated for overacting in life. Bruno, it transpires, has other uses for Fenton's passion; quite suddenly, at the after-show party, Fenton finds himself in a sexually

aggressive encounter not unlike that he had seen on stage, except that it involves two men—himself and the predatory Bruno. Fenton resorts to an honest violence, thus triggering a dramatic climax as staged and improbable as anything in Hayden Banks's powers:

“

The next thing Fenton remembered he was standing naked in the middle of the room, boxing; he was boxing the chandelier and had knocked down all the lamps, he had split open Bruno's face and Bruno was weeping and held ice packs to his mouth.

Then the next thing he remembered was Bruno standing before him with Hayden Banks who looked exactly like the murdered Desdemona. Bruno had a gun in his hand and was ordering him to leave.<sup>45</sup>

As Purdy enthusiasts may suspect, the incident, if it eclipses the play, in fact unlocks something in Fenton which will lead to further tragedy; he, like Othello, will become unlike himself and turn murderer. Stephen Adams's comment upon the complex way in which Purdy deploys the Shakespeare episode is worth quoting in full:

“

It is unfortunate that Fenton is not more selective in his suspicions of language for the substance of the play has an urgent bearing upon his situation. It is significant that Othello's tragedy stems from the destructive power of false words and culminates in the murder of the person he most cherished, in a travesty of his former self. Although the play is grossly overacted, there is, for once, evidence of words serving a deeply human purpose.<sup>46</sup>

Fenton, however—either because of his lack of refinement or because of a similar lack in the production—has entirely neglected the one lesson that might be of some use: that of the treachery of language. Instead, Purdy notes that Fenton's revival of interest in the second half came out of a sense that the actors 'seemed to talk less and do more.'<sup>47</sup> Talking, however, in Purdy's fiction constitutes tangible dramatic power, whereas action, perversely, more commonly—as in *Othello*'s tragic ending—connotes a sort of failure.

This interplay between speech and act plays itself out complexly and in myriad ways in Purdy's later novels. Space prevents me from undertaking here the

substantial study which Purdy's dexterous counterpointing of speech and act deserves; it must suffice here to offer one further example: the summative exchange between the ever-yawning 'audience,' Malcolm, and Mr. Cox, railing like a God, or an author, against the weaknesses of '[a]ll the people whom I stir to action':<sup>48</sup>

“

'I don't care how much they talk against me, or how much they talk with one another—though the only real talking / will do. But I want them to act out the parts they are meant to act out with one another!'

'And what parts would those ever be?' Malcolm wondered, not able at that moment to smother a wide yawn.

Mr. Cox waited for Malcolm to close his mouth.

'I have arranged all the situations.' Mr. Cox spoke without his usual optimism. 'Why can't they *act*?' I have brought the right people together, and the right situations. I'm not such a fool as not to know *right people* and *right situations* when they're together. But nothing happens. Nothing at all.'<sup>49</sup>

Still, Cox's exasperation is as nothing next to the discomfort experienced by the most overtly theatrical figure in *Malcolm*, Madame Girard, who notes, on hearing of her imminent divorce, that she is not prepared to abandon her title. John Webster's character, similarly reduced, rallied memorably, if ineffectually, in pursuit of desires lost: 'I am Duchess of Malfi still.' Purdy's character even loosely recalls Webster's phrasing: "I am Madame Girard," she went on. "The whole world has always known me as she, the whole world will not so quickly lose its memory."<sup>50</sup> Her husband's exhausted retort—'It has been a week of melodrama,' he said, fatigued. 'A lifetime of melodrama'—may feel exaggerated.<sup>51</sup> But we should consider the final scene in *Malcolm*. Its protagonist's funeral, as arranged by Madame Girard, is the supreme expression of solipsistic theatre, from which the requirements of other attendees have helpfully been entirely banished. In Purdy's words, it was 'a command performance, with herself as the only audience.'<sup>52</sup>

It is a truism that Elizabethan and Jacobean stagings exhibited an oscillation between speech (including soliloquy) and act which can strike contemporary audiences as—well, theatrical or mannered. Shakespeare's Hamlet's delay in enacting revenge is generally considered today by way of his predisposition for philosophical *excursus*. A far leap as it may seem, Barnes's *Nightwood* equally divides between those who do not articulate but simply enact their

sexual hunting: Nora pursuing Robin by stealth, for instance. Dr O'Connor, repository of current sexual wisdoms as he may seem, is, perversely, punished for his loquaciousness by solitude. Purdy's embrace of a striking, often gothic and always contrapuntal sense of speech and act may draw—consciously or otherwise—on a wide range of literature, and equally break new ground in embracing his characters' 'desiringness' in autotelic, even self-absorbed ways. In his finest fiction, Purdy sculpts characters as resonant and figurative as any found in the historical dramas he loved, or in works of any of his peer authors. The very singularity of Purdy's baroque embrace of an extreme speech/act contrapuntalism may have been—as he himself announced—one reason why his latter critics—the 'politically correct'—could not see the deeper truth in his stories. Conversely, this singularity is precisely what we can come to acknowledge is what will make these novels prosper in terms of critical renown.

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# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Introduction' to Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 2006), xxii.

<sup>2</sup> John Uecker, 'Two Visionaries,' in James Purdy, *Selected Plays* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Canning, interview with James Purdy, *Gay Fiction Speaks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Uecker, x-xi.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> James Purdy, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1987), 31.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Lane, 'Out with James Purdy' (1993), at: <http://www.wright.edu/~martin.kich/PurdySoc/Lane.htm> (accessed 12th March 2011).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>13</sup> Canning, 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Genet is mentioned in Christopher Lane's interview with Purdy: <http://www.wright.edu/~martin.kich/PurdySoc/Lane.htm> (accessed 12<sup>th</sup> March 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Canning, 5.

<sup>18</sup> See writer and artist Charles Henri Ford's reference to this statement in an undated interview with the *Journal of Contemporary Art* at: <http://www.jca-online.com/ford.html> (accessed 12th March 2011). Ford—also a lover of Barnes—quotes her as follows: "I'm not a lesbian," said Djuna. "I just love Thelma. Thelma's a boy!"

<sup>19</sup> Canning, 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Lane, 'Out with James Purdy,' op.cit.

<sup>24</sup> Canning, 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

- <sup>28</sup> James Purdy, *Cabot Wright Begins* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1985), 4.
- <sup>29</sup> Purdy, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, op. cit., 3.
- <sup>30</sup> Collected in Purdy, *Children is All* (New York: New Directions, 1961).
- <sup>31</sup> Purdy, *Narrow Rooms* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1985), 7.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>33</sup> Purdy, *Malcolm*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959), 26.
- <sup>34</sup> Purdy, 63: *Dream Palace*, this edition is in his *Color of Darkness* (Philadelphia/New York: Lippincott's, 1961), 177.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.
- <sup>42</sup> Purdy, *Malcolm*, 30.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>44</sup> Purdy, 63: *Dream Palace*, op. cit., 182.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.
- <sup>46</sup> Stephen Adams, *James Purdy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976), 24.
- <sup>47</sup> Purdy, 63: *Dream Palace*, op. cit. 182.
- <sup>48</sup> Purdy, *Malcolm*, 84.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

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